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My Boy Jack

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Manuscript

No manuscript is known to have survived nor is there any record of the poem's date of composition, although circumstantial evidence points to late September/early October 1916 as a likely period.

Publication History

First published on 19 October 1916 simultaneously in *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *New York Times*.

The poem, untitled, stood at the head of 'Cripple and Paralytic', the first in a sequence of four 'Stories of the Battle', articles, with the overall title "Destroyers at Jutland". Two of the subsequent articles were also accompanied by untitled poems: 26 October, "Zion" or "The Doorkeepers of Zion"; 31 October, "The Verdicts, Jutland 1916". No poem accompanied the 23 October article.

To establish US copyright,, "Destroyers at Jutland", including "My Boy Jack", still untitled, was produced in 1916 in an edition of seventy copies by the New York publishers Doubleday, Page & Co., each of the four articles in a separate paperback booklet

First commercial book publication was in "Destroyers at Jutland" in *Sea Warfare* (London: Macmillan, December 1916; New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., February 1917).

The poem was first published with its title "My Boy Jack" in *Twenty Poems* from Rudyard Kipling (London: Methuen, May 1918; Toronto: Macmillan, 1918); and again with its title in *The Years Between* (London: Methuen, 1919; New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., April 1919).

The date '1914-18' was placed below the title in the three-volume Verse, *Inclusive Edition* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, December 1919; New York, Doubleday, Page & Co., December 1919; Toronto: Copp Clark, 1919).

There are recordings of Edward German's setting are on Youtube, as sung by Clara Butt and Louise Kirkby-Lunn. There's also a version by Peter Bellamy.

Textual Variants

In *Twenty Poems*, the title was printed within double inverted commas. Thereafter, in *The Years Between* and the *Inclusive Edition*, the inverted commas were removed.

Between the 1916 London newspaper text of the poem, *Twenty Poems*, and the *Inclusive Edition* there are some slight variants that may have been introduced by Kipling himself or by the printers working with or without the publishers' instructions. Despite these uncertainties, special authority must be given to the text in *Twenty Poems* since this was a short collection selected by Kipling in 1917-18 to serve as an interim volume until his health improved sufficiently to undertake *The Years Between*, a larger collection of his recent poetry. Moreover, Kipling had been urged to bring out a cheap edition of his verse. In his *The Letters of Rudyard Kipling* (vol. 4, p. 480 note 5) Thomas Pinney (Ed.) comments that this—*Twenty Poems*, paperbound, sold at 1 shilling—'may possibly have been RK's response'.

The 1916 *New York Times* text introduces variations found nowhere else: there is no italicisation throughout the entire poem; the fourth line in each of the four stanzas is divided, so making a fifth line ie in stanzas one and two, 'And this tide!', in stanzas three and four, 'And that tide!'. In line three,

Whether these variations were introduced by Kipling, or by the clerks responsible for the sending and receipt of the 'Special Cable' by which the poems and articles were transmitted from London to New York, or whether they reflect editorial practice within the *New York Times*, is not known. In any event, as David Page (formerly editor of *The Kipling Journal*) has suggested, Kipling, a former newspaperman himself and familiar with the ways of editors and printers, is likely to have taken a pragmatic view about changes over which he had no control, especially those that took place across the Atlantic.

The textual differences between the original newspaper publication, and later publication in *Twenty Poems*, *The Years Between*, the *Inclusive Edition*, and the final *Sussex Edition*, are mainly variations in punctuation (e.g. some commas in the final version instead of full stops), and such changes in text as 'any one' for 'anyone' and 'did not' for 'didn't'. The text we have published in this Guide is from the *Inclusive Edition*.

Background

On 31 May and 1 June 1916, the Battle of Jutland took place, the major naval engagement of the First World War, in which the British Grand Fleet sustained heavy losses – thirteen vessels and over 6000 men, whereas the losses of the German High Seas Fleet were considerably less. This was far from the naval triumph the public was hoping for, and the initial report, concentrating on the British losses, conveyed the impression of a British defeat.

To counter this, Kipling was invited by the Admiralty to provide a series of morale-raising articles describing the destroyer attacks during the battle. According to Douglas Brownrigg, the Chief Naval Censor, the Admiralty official who first approached Kipling 'off his own bat' 'he was enthusiastic about the job' and 'accepted the task, notwithstanding the numbing and withering censorship that had to be imposed on him' (*Indiscretions of a Naval Censor*, 1920, pp. 58-59).

The series of four articles Kipling began on or soon after 19 August and were completed by 11 September, drawing heavily on destroyer reports and the eyewitness statements of officers involved. In the third of the Jutland articles Kipling comments on the formulaic character of naval language and the nature of life on board ship:

> The Senior Service does not gush. There are certain formulae appropriate to every occasion. …….Presently my friend of the destroyer went back to his stark, desolate life, where feelings do not count.

These few words seem to capture much of the form and spirit of "My Boy Jack" and they suggest that the poem was either in Kipling's mind or already down on paper around the time when the articles were written.

Early Reception

The war-time concert performances and recordings of "My Boy Jack" form an important stage in its early reception as a work promoting patriotism and stoic bravery in the face of death. In May 1919, Kipling wrote to that effect to his American publisher, Frank N. Doubleday, commenting on the poem's inclusion in *The Years Between*: 'p. 61. My Boy Jack. Sung at concerts, etc. all over England, and next to "For all we have and are" the most popular of the war-verses for quotation'. (Pinney, vol 4 p. 543.)

"My Boy Jack" came to the attention of the great contralto Clara Butt. She invited Edward German to her home and 'read the lines aloud to him, giving him her reading of the poem. He perfectly grasped her idea, and brought her in a day or to a setting which perfectly expressed it' (Winifred Ponder, *Clara Butt: Her Life Story*, 1928, p.189). He was a good choice. With Kipling's approval, in The Just-So Song Book (1903), German had already provided well-known and popular settings for twelve poems from the Just So Stories (1903) and later for "Big Steamers" and "Dane-geld" (both 1911).

German set "My Boy Jack" both for solo voice and piano and also the accompaniment of full orchestra; and on 26 February 1916, described as 'a new song', with the title 'Have you news of My Boy Jack', it was performed by Clara Butt at a Royal Philharmonic concert conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. In February/March 1917, under Beecham, it was recorded by Clara Butt. Later that year, she performed the song at 'The Pageant of Fair Women', a patriotic entertainment held at the Queen's Hall and several times repeated at other venues.

According to *The Times* (8 May 1917), describing the dress rehearsal, the 'central theme' of the 'Pageant' was 'the Allies rallying to the call of England and justice', while Clara Butt, cast as Britannia 'the Spirit of Empire', sang 'some stirring music, and among her songs is "Have you news of my boy Jack" with Kipling's words'.

In July 1917, the famous oratorio contralto Louise Kirkby-Lunn made a recording with a symphony orchestra conducted by German himself. A recent comment describes the poignancy and power of his setting:

> …after "Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?" the anguish in German's treatment of "None this tide, . . Nor any tide," is almost unbearable before the final defiant shout of faith, "hold your head up" '

[Brian Mattinson in "*Kipling and Music*", 6 September 2007].

Clara Butt was capable of doing full justice to the vividly melodramatic style and emotional projection that the song called for. Standing six foot two, she was famed for her booming voice. Sir Thomas Beecham once said that on a clear day, she could be heard across the English Channel, and during the war, she was immensely popular as a concert performer of patriotic songs and ballads, including "My Boy Jack", which remained at the centre of her repertoire.

The Times reviewed *Twenty Poems* on 1 May 1918, in which it remarks particularly on 'My Boy Jack':

> …when the war came, he was the one who before all others saw and said exactly what it would be. He had the poet's "terrible sagacity," the vision and the passion. For Kipling at times, like the truest poets, reaches the absolute Greek simplicity. His verse seems the breath of passion made visible and taking shape like the wisp of cloud in the rack of the hurricane. Nature seems to speak through him, and the art blots itself out. Shakespeare had this gift. Tennyson had it in "Break, Break!". Kipling has in "My Boy Jack" [quoting the final stanza].

The 'Jack'/John confusion

The modern understanding of the poem has been bedevilled by the presumption that 'Jack' of the poem is to be equated with Kipling's son John, an identification set in motion by David Haig in his playscript 'My Boy Jack', first published and performed in 1997.

This identification was reinforced in 1998 by Major and Mrs Holt's book entitled *My Boy Jack? The Search for Kipling's Only Son* (latest edition 2007) and further reinforced by the television film "My Boy Jack". Derived from Haig's play, it was first shown in the UK to an audience approaching six million on Remembrance Day 2007 and premiered in the United States in April 2008. For these viewers, the John=Jack equation is cemented in the closing shot where Haig, playing Kipling, reads the poem to himself. This equation, supported by the University of Sussex, was further endorsed by the Imperial War Museum in its "My Boy Jack" exhibition from November 2007 to February 2008. Yet, exactly as John signed his last letter home, written when he was close to the front line, a letter from the Sussex archive, prominent in the publicity for the exhibition, within the family John was John, never Jack, Jack being the name of the family dog.

Given the occasion of the poem, heading the reports on the Battle of Jutland with its great loss of life, 'Jack' is evidently the eponymous Jack Tar; and if one is seeking to attach the poem to any individual 'Jack', that would be young John Cornwell, the boy sailor (referred to in the press as 'the Boy Jack') whose bravery at the Battle of Jutland was recognised with the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross on 15 September 1916.

But even that identification was overridden by Kipling in the *Inclusive Edition* (1919) in which he added the years '1914-18' below the title, so disengaging the poem from its original Jutland context, and its possible association with Jack Cornwell, and transforming it into an in memoriam tribute for all those who died at sea and conveying words of stern comfort for those who mourned them.

A judicious view of the John/Jack issue is taken by Andrew Lycett when he remarks that "My Boy Jack" reveals that Kipling 'could call on a vast reservoir of pain at the loss of his son' (p. 471), a comment that does not require us to make any identifications but points to one of the poem's most immediate emotional sources.

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